

Here's a 'Liar' you will love

By Reed Johnson
Theater Critic

Last Friday's performance of "The Liar" by the Antaeus Company in North Hollywood had all the makings of a classic preview night from hell.

A couple of actors were still learning their lines, a piece of the set refused to stay put, and the leading role changed hands at the last minute.

Why, then, was this production of Juan Ruiz de Alarcón's 17th-century comedy

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— apparently the first fully staged adaptation ever seen in the United States — such an exhilarating and promising experience?

The answer lies partly in the sheer pleasure of seeing Antaeus, an ambitious, demonstrably talented classical theater company, take up residence in a North Hollywood warehouse, which it plans to convert into its permanent home.

Originally a pilot program of the Mark Taper Forum, Antaeus has grown slowly and steadily, producing a handful of well-regarded shows such as its production of Chekhov's "The Wood Demon" while also taking part in numerous workshops and play readings.

Now the actor-driven troupe turns its considerable skills to a neglected near-masterpiece written by a semi-obscure Mexican-born playwright who cast his cool, humorous eye on the foibles of Madrid high society in Spain's golden age.

Smartly and accessibly translated into

The facts

- **What:** "The Liar."
- **Where:** The Antaeus Company at the Secret Rose Theatre, 11246 Magnolia Blvd., North Hollywood.
- **When:** Through Feb. 27. Performances at 8 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays, 2:30 p.m. Sundays; also 7 p.m. Feb. 27.
- **Tickets:** \$16 to \$20; \$3 discount for students and seniors. Call (818) 506-5436.
- **Our rating:** ★★★

rhyming verse by Antaeus co-founder Dakin Matthews from Alarcón's original Spanish text "La verdad sospechosa" ("The Truth Can't Be Trusted"), the play is a classically plotted three-act comedy centering on a handsome, charming young man, Don Garcia, who simply can't tell the truth — not to his flustered father, Don Beltran (Marcelo Tubert), nor his wily servant Tristan (Matthews), nor to Jacinta (Nike Doukas), the beautiful young lady he adores, and certainly not to her jealous suitor, Don Juan de Sosa (a splendid Richard Miro), who always enters the stage to a fiery burst of flamenco guitar to match his smoldering machismo.

This isn't to say that Don Garcia is a rogue, certainly not as played by J.D. Cullum, the googly-eyed actor who brought his ingenuous, disarming brand of good humor and expressive physical



Mikael Salazar, left, and J.D. Cullum star in Juan Ruiz de Alarcón's 17th-century comedy, "The Liar," now playing at the Secret Rose Theatre through Feb. 27.

shtick to last summer's Getty Center production of Frank Dwyer's "The Affliction of Glory: A Comedy About Tragedy."

Outfitted in Astro-turf colored knickers, Cullum's Don Garcia isn't a Moliere-style cynic, but an exuberant aristocrat carried away by artistic flights of fancy that lead him to recount Rabelaisian banquets and swashbuckling exploits that occur only in his mind. Filling the role on short notice, Cullum occasionally lost his grip on Alarcón's colloquial poetry, but never on his own facile charisma.

Apart from a few verbal missteps here and there, which surely will disappear as the run continues, the Antaeus ensemble gave evidence of its own

classical polish, impressively orchestrated by director Anne McNaughton. Doukas, an accomplished performer with South Coast Repertory and the Old Globe (as well as Cullum's beautiful co-star in "Affliction") demonstrated her sure touch with cerebral comedy, as did Julia Fletcher in the role of the chaste Lucretia; Don Garcia's other (inadvertent) love interest, Matthews is just about perfect as the perceptive manservant Tristan, and Dean Cameron's set design of arras framing a curtained entrance/exit is simple and effective.

Here's wishing good fortune to a company that's likely to be a sparkling new addition to Valley theater — and that's no lie.